OBITUARIES

Newsday 10/4/96

Rufus Youngblood, 72, Secret Service Hero at Dallas

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An American hero — Rufus Youngblood, the Secret Service agent honored for throwing his body on top of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson to protect him when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated — has died at 72.

Mr. Youngblood, a Georgia native who retired to Savannah more than 20 years ago, died Wednesday of lung cancer in a hospice there, said his daughter, Rebecca Youngblood Vaughn.

AP Photo, 1974
Rufus Youngblood

In the Nov. 22, 1963 motorcade in Dallas, Johnson was riding in the back seat of an open car a short distance behind the president's. Mr. Youngblood, chief of Johnson's Secret Service detail, was in the front seat. When shots rang out, Mr. Youngblood instantly vaulted into the back seat and — faithful to the Secret Service agents' oath to give up their lives, if necessary, to protect those in their care — shielded Johnson's body with his own. "Get down!" he shouted to Johnson and others in the car. "Get down!"

Later, Mr. Youngblood said he was not even sure he had heard shots. "It could have been a firecracker, a bomb or a shot," he said. "I recognized it as an abnormal sound and realized some action had to be taken. I saw quick, unnatural movements in the president's car."

For the rest of the assassination day, Johnson — unaccustomed to taking orders from anyone — did whatever Mr. Youngblood directed. Back in Washington that night, Johnson told intimates: "Rufus did a very brave thing today."

He later saw to it that Mr. Youngblood was given the highest award presented by the Treasury Department, which oversees the Secret Service. He also saw to it that Mr. Youngblood rose steadily in the Secret Service — first to chief of the White House detail, then to assistant director in charge of all protective missions and finally to the Service's No. 2 job, deputy director.

But, when Richard M. Nixon succeeded Johnson as president in 1969, Mr. Youngblood found his career at a dead end. Nixon and his aides assumed that Mr. Youngblood, because he was closely identified with Johnson, was an enemy. Although he remained in the No. 2 position, he was given few duties. He retired in 1971.

Mr. Youngblood's survivors also include his wife, Peggy. Funeral arrangements were pending yesterday.

During the years Mr. Youngblood protected Johnson, from 1963 to 1968, he frequently — if respectfully — contradicted the president. Secret Service agents are required to keep their hands unencumbered — in case an emergency arises. Once, Mr. Youngblood was standing beside Johnson in church. Everyone except Mr. Youngblood was holding a hymn book. The congregation was singing "Onward Christian Soldiers," and Mr. Youngblood joined in.

"You're not supposed to sing," Johnson muttered.

"I can if I know the words," Mr. Youngblood replied.

AP Photo, 1963
Rufus Youngblood keeps watch as grim-faced President Lyndon Johnnson leaves Parkland Memorial Hospital, Dallas, after JFK assassination. Kennedy's body was still at hospital.